



BORDER PATROL: PROTECTING ANIMAL HEALTH ON BOTH SIDES OF THE RIO GRANDE



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Howdy, y'all. I want to start off this issue by thanking the Texas Veterinary Medical Association (TVMA) for all the support it has afforded the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) in the ongoing legislative session. No one knows at press time how things will turn out related to the various bills under consideration, but your TVMA leadership has done a great job of supporting animal health issues in the current political arena. The TAHC is a state agency managed and run by veterinarians who simply want to create and maintain a healthy animal population within the state. That is why we went to veterinary school, and we are proud to partner with TVMA in that effort.

As I mulled over the talking points I have given to various elected officials and committees throughout the legislative session, it became obvious that one topic keeps coming up again and again: Mexico! Not only has the border violence affected human safety and commerce, but the same also holds true on the animal side of things. Here are a few situations related to Mexico and animal health that you may find interesting.

The U.S. imports approximately one million feeder steers and spayed heifers a year from Mexico. At least half of those enter through the Texas ports at Pharr, Laredo, Eagle Pass, Del Rio and Presidio. At the current time, the dangerous border conditions have altered the normal trade system. Normally these cattle would be inspected by USDA veterinarians on the Mexican side of the border to ensure they are fever-tick free and have passed all animal health certifications required, such as negative TB tests and official ID requirements. But the dangerous border climate does not allow U.S. officials to enter Mexico at any port location. As a result, TAHC has worked closely with the Mexican and Texas cattle industry to ensure that trade can continue safely for this important commodity by helping establish temporary inspection pens on

the Texas side of the river. The temporary facilities must have scales, dipping vats and good biosecurity and be located in locations as secure as possible. We are proud to say that the temporary Texas facilities are now operating in the second year with no adverse issues to note. The cattle enter in sealed trailers, any rejects are sent straight back to Mexico, and we have working arrangements with local emergency management officials in case of a truck wreck.

We continue to see a problem with stray cattle and horses wandering along the border from El Paso to Brownsville. Last year, approximately 500 cattle and 100 Mexican horses were caught in Texas. One group of 10 horses that were caught were all found to be infected with equine piroplasmiasis (EP). EP is considered a foreign animal disease in the U.S. and, if established, could affect horse movements and trade. Our main concern is that some of these animals could be introduced into normal trading channels and soon become part of the U.S. livestock populations. It is our goal to beef up inspections in far West Texas and work closely with USDA and border security officials to ensure that does not happen.

The permanent fever tick quarantine zone from Del Rio to Brownsville has seen solid success in the last three years, partially because of hard work by the USDA and TAHC staff down there. But one of the few good things resulting from the drought of 2011 is that it killed a lot of ticks. We have less than 10 infested pastures outside the permanent zone (on average three to five miles wide along the Rio Grande), compared to 75 premises and more than one million acres temporarily quarantined in the free zone just three years ago. This is a great success and a relief to our trade partners and state veterinarians in other parts of the U.S. who continuously worry about Texas cattle bringing them the fever tick and the Babesia organisms found within them. Still, border violence continues to

hamper river patrol efforts down there. Those tick riders are riding in dangerous drug territory on a daily basis. We just held the first-ever meeting with TAHC, USDA and officials from Tamaulipas and Coahuila to discuss such issues along the river. The lines of communication are open between cattle and veterinary officials, and that is a great start to continued success.

We are closely watching a current outbreak of High Path Avian Influenza in Mexico right now. TAHC is trying to ramp up border inspections of poultry for sale in border towns to ensure smuggled birds are not creeping into the state. The U.S. border protection officials and customs inspectors do a great job of looking for smuggled poultry products, including eggs, that may have the virus in them, but a continued vigilance by all concerned stakeholders must take place as well.

Finally, a recent case of horses dually infected with EP and EIA in California confirmed what we believe to be true here as well. Horses infected with EP in the racing industry with Mexico connections (Mexican owners, trainers, trained in Mexico, etc.) are also high-risk of EIA dual-infection. We are vigilantly testing for both diseases now when we find either in a high-risk horse. Both are endemic diseases in Mexico, and if the disease has been spread by poor biosecurity or dirty needles, it is very possible you could have a horse infected with both. Please keep this fact in mind when working through diagnostic options for horses with compatible symptoms.

So even though trade with Mexico is going well, the opportunity for disease transmission in a variety of species is ongoing. It is TAHC's job to mitigate risk while maintaining trade. If you practice along the border or see animals of any species that may have a connection to our neighbor to the south, please consider not only normal U.S. disease possibilities but also those that are still present in Mexico when making a diagnosis. **TV**